

Master Sheet 5.2b

These 10 accounts are listed in approximate chronological order corresponding to the sequence of the eruptive events.

The number following the site location corresponds to the numbers on the map

(Master Sheet 5.2a) showing the location of eyewitnesses.

Photocopy both sides. Cut up like note cards.

Eyewitness Account #1:

Name: K. and D. Stoffel (geologists)

Event witnessed: avalanche and beginning of the eruption

Site location: in a small aircraft directly over Mount St. Helens

“As we approached the summit, flying at an altitude of about 11,000 feet, everything was calm...Just as we passed above the western side of the summit crater, we noticed landsliding of rock and ice debris... Within a matter of seconds—perhaps 15— the whole north side of the summit crater began to move instantaneously...The entire mass began to ripple and churn up...then the entire north side of the summit began sliding north...We took photographs of this slide sequence occurring, but before we could snap off more than a few pictures, a huge explosion blasted out of the avalanche-detachment... We never felt nor heard a thing...From our viewpoint, the initial cloud appeared to mushroom laterally [sideways] to the north and plunge down. Within seconds, the cloud had mushroomed enough to obscure our view.”

Eyewitness Account #3:

Name: J. Downing (climber)

Event witnessed: directed blast

Site location: 75 kilometers (47 miles) N/climbing on Mount Rainier at 3,200 meters (1,050 feet)

Climbers on Mount Rainier observed two distinct “flows,” which began very shortly after the eruption started. These “flows” were described as clouds 300 to 600 meters (1,000 to 2,000 feet) thick that appeared to hug the ground. The heads of the “flows” disappeared into valleys and reappeared as they “hopped” over ridges. The earlier flow traveled to the west, perhaps down the North Fork Toutle River, and was followed almost immediately by a “flow” that seemed to travel to the east.

Eyewitness Account #2:

Name: P. and C. Hickson (geologists)

Event witnessed: avalanche and beginning of the eruption

Site location: 15 km (9 miles) E/Near road 125, east of Mount St. Helens

“As the avalanche reached the halfway point on the mountain, the summit eruption began with a dense black cloud followed by lighter gray material. A second eruption halfway down the slope occurred moments later.” At this time the avalanche appeared to consist of upper and lower parts. The flank eruption was between the two. Seconds later the upper slide overrode the flank eruption and material was hurled far down the slope onto the lower slide. About 45 seconds after the avalanche began, the eruptive centers merged and the rapidly expanding cloud overtook the avalanche.

Eyewitness Account #4:

Name: C. McNerney

Event witnessed: directed blast

Site location: 13 kilometers (8 miles) NW/driving on south side of North Fork Toutle River

Following the collapse of the north side, a foglike ring (cloud) descended very quickly and expanded out from the mountain. At about 2 minutes after the beginning of the eruption, the witnesses began driving west at about 110-120 kilometers per hour (70-75 miles per hour). At this speed, they did not seem to get any farther away from the cloud. The wind blowing into the car was warm enough to give the impression that the car heater was on. They increased their speed to 135 kilometers per hour (85 miles per hour) and began outdistancing the cloud. About four kilometers (2.5 miles) farther west they stopped and could not see the black cloud. After a short time the cloud reappeared. The base of the black cloud looked “like avalanches of black chalk dust—first one part of the black cloud would shoot out in front, then another, then another, like waves lapping up on a beach.” Pulling back onto the highway, they outran the cloud at about 105 kilometers per hour (65 miles per hour).